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4 Curiosity and the Fate of Chronicles and Narratives

Chiel van den Akker

In the center of Anton Raphael Mengs's 1772/3 allegorical ceiling fresco of the Museum Clementine in the *Camera dei Papiri* of the Vatican, Clio (History) writes in her book as she watches Janus Bifrons (Past and Future) pointing to the statue of a sleeping Cleopatra in the museum (see figure 6).¹ The foundation of the Museum Clementine is recorded for posterity. The personification of fame and glory, Fama, too points to the museum, and on the left a Genius (the museum's "soul"?) carrying several scrolls of papyrus is depicted. It is striking that Clio has placed her book on the shoulders of Chronos (Time), who, while sitting on the floor, gazes at an epigraph only he has in view. This epigraph is a testimony of the pagan past, subjected to decay and in danger of being forgotten. The message we may infer from this fresco is that the museum, like history, keeps the past alive while time passes: that is history's triumph over time.

Preserving what would otherwise be lost is one of the tasks of the (art) history museum and an important reason for its existence. Obviously, (art) history museums have other tasks as well, and the task of preservation is not limited to this type of museum. In this chapter I am concerned with the representation of the past in museums.

Mengs's ceiling fresco also appears in Wolfgang Ernst's essay on virtual museums. In his "Archi(ve)textures of Museology" he observes:

Two regimes conflict here: registering and description on the one hand and historiographical narrative on the other. On the borderline between history and archaeology, it is not clear what Clio is doing in the museum: is she writing in a book or entering items in a register? Her attention is diverted by Janus, who points to the realm of the aesthetic (represented by Cleopatra/Ariadne in the museum), whereas in fact what is brought to her is data. Instead of being a history of art, her book might be an inventory, appropriately placed in this painting on the shoulders of Chronos.²

1 An extensive description of this fresco is offered by S. Röttgen, "Das Papyruskabinett von Mengs in der Biblioteca Vaticana," *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 31 (1980): 189-246.

2 W. Ernst, "Archi(ve)textures of Museology," in *Museums and Memory*, ed. S.A. Crane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 17-34 (23). The statue of a sleeping Ariadne in the Museum

The distinction between archaeology and art history is formulated in dichotomies. Register and book, inventory and narrative, data and aesthetics; they belong to opposing *knowledge* regimes.³ (The distinction is not between academic disciplines.) Ernst favors the regime of archaeology (registration and description) above the regime of history (narration); the historical narrative has no place in the virtual museum.

We may doubt whether the opposition between these regimes is as stark as Ernst suggests. If we doubt that, we may still accept that the opposition has a heuristic function that enables us to conceptualize the online museum and the way it represents the past, even if we disagree with Ernst's interpretation of Mengs's fresco. As for the latter, Clio's attention does not seem to be diverted by Janus Bifrons at all, for does she not eagerly await him to separate the past from the present and the future? She knows that this is something that Chronos cannot do, for he merely counts days, one after the other, for all eternity. History not only triumphs over time inasmuch as she is able to preserve what would otherwise be irretrievably lost. The real triumph is that Clio knows what Chronos can never *know*: how in retrospect the past acquires a meaning that, for contemporaries, it never could have had.

The distinction between the regimes of archaeology and history can be reformulated in terms of the distinction between the chronicle and the narrative, where the chronicle is defined as a list of items and the narrative as a retrospective view on events – with a beginning, middle, and end – and a central theme or “thought.” Ernst, however, would disagree with this reformulation for, as a list of items, the chronicle easily lends itself to a linear chronological presentation of objects: a sequence of moments, one after the other. And it is this chronological order that is rejected by Ernst. Moreover, he rejects the regime of (art) history (narrative) precisely because it presents its objects in a linear chronological order.⁴ Now, even if we admit this to be so, we should realize, which Ernst does not do, that the narrative's understanding does not follow from the chronological order of its objects, for as the narrativist philosopher of history Louis Mink maintains: “To comprehend temporal succession means to think of it in both directions

Clementine was until the end of the eighteenth century thought to represent Cleopatra.

3 This is a central theme in Ernst's work. See for example his collection of essays, edited and introduced by Jussi Parikka: Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Michel Foucault's notion of archaeology inspired Ernst's work. I will not discuss that here and instead limit myself to Ernst's views in his “Archi(ve)textures of Museology” because in that essay the museum is central.

4 Ernst, “Archi(ve)textures,” 18, 29–30.

Figure 6 Anton Raphael Mengs (1772/73). *The Triumph of History over Time: Allegory of the Museum Clementinum*. Ceiling fresco in the Camera dei Papiri, Vatican Library



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at once, and then time is no longer the river which bears us along but the river in aerial view, upstream and downstream seen in a single survey.”⁵

The chronicle and the narrative are not the only models with which to represent the past, and sometimes these models are explicitly criticized by contemporary museum theorists. As an alternative, museums may display objects in small discontinuous historical series that do not belong to an encompassing (master) narrative. They can also present objects from different times in an order of co-presence: an eternal present tense that denies each object’s past and future. This is the model that Ernst argues for.⁶ The display of objects may further aim at a sense of immersion into the past, abolishing the distance between past and present, and with it the retrospective view that is characteristic of the (art) historical narrative. These three alternative models of representing the past may be realized using information technology on-site and online or by conventional means of museum display.

There may be other models to represent the past with, and many actual exhibitions are hybrids of these models. Here I am interested in the models I mentioned. In the first section of this chapter, I will compare the use of the chronicle and narrative in on-site (physical) museums with their use in online (virtual) museums. This section is followed by an analysis of the three alternative models of representing the past: the display of discontinuous historical series, the display of objects in an order of co-presence, and immersive display. In the third section, the chronicle and narrative will be evaluated in light of these alternatives.

The Old and the New

A comparison between the on-site and online museum is misleading in that it suggests that the models and concepts underlying online museum display are autonomous with regard to developments and insights in on-site museums and museum theory. To avoid this misleading suggestion, I will distinguish between the old and the new in addition to distinguishing between on-site and online museums. Some online museums use the chronicle

5 L.O. Mink, “History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension,” *New Literary History* 1 no. 3 (1970): 551-559 (554-555).

6 Ernst, “Archi(ve)textures,” 30. Stevens recently also argued for the use of the order of co-presence in (virtual) museums. See M. Stevens, *Virtuele Herinnering. Kunstmusea in een Digitale Cultuur* (PhD diss., Radboud University, 2009), 90-91, 96, 114.

and the narrative in a similar way as conventional on-site museums do, whereas some on-site museums use alternative models of representing the past, similar to those used in some online museums. On-site (physical) and online (virtual) museums thus are either old or new, making use of conventional or innovative means of display. The point is that we should neither associate the “new” with digital technologies, as if a change of medium is innovative in itself; nor should we associate the “old” with the absence of digital technologies, as if the refusal to change the medium prevents innovation. (Below we will see that the most appropriate distinction between the old and the new is that between what Eilean Hooper-Greenhill refers to as the modernist museum and the post-museum.)

When comparing the on-site and online use of narrative, we should realize that the concept of narrative that is used may differ. On-site and online museums may use the same narrative model differently, or they may use different narrative models. Therefore I shall make a distinction between the old, panoramic, linear narrative, and the new, personal, interactively created narrative. Again we may question whether this distinction is as stark as I suggest, but this leaves untouched its heuristic function. The chronicle appears to be a stable concept, so there is no need to distinguish between the old and the new chronicle. We should, however, distinguish between the chronicle as a mere list of items and the chronicle as a linear chronological sequence of objects and events. Some differences between the on-site and online use of chronicles and narratives readily emerge. In what follows I will make several distinctions between “the old” and “the new.”

In the conventional on-site museum, one either follows a route of chronologically ordered objects, room after room, period after period, or one sees a narrative gradually unfold while following the required route. Of course, visitors may do as they like (as long as their behavior is appropriate) and disregard the order that the museum provides, and curators in turn may anticipate such behavior. Nonetheless, visitors do take routes that either depart from the curated route or not. Online museums do not literally have such routes (with the exception of some odd online museums mimicking an on-site museum’s floor plan); they have navigation paths instead. Still, here too the model used is a route to be taken by the visitor, even if the interface allows its users to take different routes or navigation paths. Moving through time as one moves through the museum is in accordance with the conventional museum model, where objects that are characteristic of certain periods and cultures are linearly ordered, and this model can be used in both on-site and online museums. This traditional model of museum display follows from the chronicle, taken as a chronological sequence of

objects, by definition; it follows from the narrative by convention, since the understanding of the narrative does not coincide with the chronological order of its signifying objects.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for example, provides its online visitors with the choice between Timelines and Thematic Essays (one can also select a region or search and browse their collection).⁷ The Timelines section uses the chronicle as a model to present history; the Thematic Essays section uses the narrative. One such timeline is that of “Central Europe (including Germany), 1600-1800 AD.” It presents empires, wars, and dynasties on a timeline, next to a short description of the period, descriptions of key events in their chronological order, and seventy-five works of art of the period, also in a chronological order. One can also view the reproductions of these artworks in a slide show, which presents them, again, in their chronological order. In this example, the chronicle is a list of chronologically ordered items concerning one topic. In the Timelines section one can navigate to one of the thematic essays via the related content section and leave the presentation of history by means of the chronicle behind. By choosing the essay “Neoclassicism” in the Thematic Essays section, a narrative is presented of the theme, and the objects in the museum collection are used to signify that theme.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art uses a conventional interface to provide access to its collection, giving their visitors a choice between timelines and (art) historical narratives. Many (art) history museum websites use a timeline to present objects and events, and some of them explicitly tell a story using objects to illustrate that story (general history museums probably do that more often than art history museums). The Smithsonian National Museum of American History is a case in point.⁸ An event on a timeline, the Boston Massacre of 1770, provides entrance to an online exhibition called “The Price of Freedom: Americans at War.” By selecting a conflict, “War of Independence” for example, a traditional, patriotic story on national history is told using objects to illustrate that story.

The old chronicle and narrative present their objects in a fixed order (we are not allowed to change the order of objects in a museum by rearranging its paintings and pottery). If we disregard this order by crisscrossing the museum, we have to memorize the objects seen if we want to compare them. A curated order, by contrast, allows direct comparison of objects for a reason. Exhibitions are designed to guide visitors through the museum,

7 <http://www.metmuseum.org/>. Last accessed 9 January 2014.

8 <http://americanhistory.si.edu/>. Last accessed 9 January 2014.

following the model used. In what we may refer to as the “new” museum, this no longer appears to be so (but we are still not allowed to change the order of objects in on-site museums, though this is easily done in online museums). Some museums are experimenting with alternative routes, thereby opening up the fixed order of objects as presented by the chronicle or the narrative. The Philadelphia Museum of Art, for example, provides the opportunity for visitors to create a personal online gallery of favorite museum objects, customize a tour, and share it with friends at the “My Museum” section.⁹ Many museums facilitate such online access to their collections. Routes on online view, customized by the institution or the online visitor, can be taken on-site if visitors are enabled to plan their on-site tour in advance. Each different route, whether on-site or online, is a small narrative that unfolds while taking the tour. These narratives however are no longer panoramic historical narratives: they are personal narratives insofar as the museum’s objects on the chosen route reflect the mood one is in and the interests one has. Linearity is exchanged for *interactivity*, and the *personal* view is preferred above the general panoramic view.

Another difference between the on-site and online use of chronicles and narratives is that the online chronicles and narratives are *variable*: they are made of building blocks that can be taken apart and recombined. Two chronicles on different topics may be recombined into a new chronicle with a new topic. The order of objects in a narrative can be rearranged, which either leads to the same narrative told differently (narrative understanding, after all, does not depend on the chronological order of objects and events but on the theme holding those objects and events together in a comprehensive “thought” or theme), or to a different narrative (with a different theme). Objects that were once used to form a narrative are now recombined, providing a *collage* of perspectives. For example, as part of their ongoing 2010 Art ReMix project, the Minneapolis Institute of Art exhibits contemporary art amidst their permanent collection. Another part of the project is the juxtaposition of two artworks or other objects (a photograph of people gazing at an artwork for example) on their website. According to the online announcement of the project, a remix provides “an alternative view or new perspective on art history and art-making.” By juxtaposing contemporary and historical works of art, contemporary art “enriches the story.”¹⁰ The story to be enriched is presumably the canonical master narrative on art history that is usually found in textbooks.

9 <http://www.philamuseum.org/>. Last accessed 9 January 2014.

10 <http://www2.artsimia.org/blogs/art-remix/>. Last accessed 9 January 2014.

Juxtaposing artworks from different times no doubt provides an alternate view on art history and art-making. By seeing one work in terms of the other, the *meaning* of both is affected. More important in the context of this chapter is the implicit criticism of conventional models of museum display in the Art ReMix project. Obviously, the chronological order of artworks is explicitly criticized by disregarding it. It criticizes the chronicle by exhibiting objects in an order of co-presence, denying their origins in different epochs. Art history is criticized by not taking it as the starting point of the exhibition; instead, art history functions as a point of reference of what the juxtaposing of artworks does not lead to – affirming the (canonical) art historical context of the works.

This last criticism is interesting in that it assumes that the artwork provides the context, whereas traditionally an artwork is situated in a historical context. The insight we may infer from this is that it is a mistake to believe that there is, first, a ready-made historical context, and, second, an object (an artwork or other artefact) that can and should be placed in that context. It is precisely the other way around: objects provide the context for comparison, insights, and deliberations. One advantage of online collections is the relative ease with which the opportunity can be offered to many diverse users to have such a learning experience. It is important to note that, regardless of whether this insight is true or not, it does not follow that we should stop using (art) historical narratives; it follows that the narrative should not have priority over objects. Objects, after all, should give the narrative, and this function should depart from the object. To bring this about, the object should be central, and museums should find a balance between telling too little and telling too much. When there is too little to go on, the object will not tell anything. If there is too much to go on, the narrative does not need the object to be told.

The Art Remix project also implicitly criticizes the authoritative, single voice of the curator and (art) historian. This brings me to the last distinction I want to make between the old and the new. The old historical narrative is characterized by the retrospective view of its author: the historian or curator. Like the chronicle, which is also a monographic model, it no longer seems to fit our present-day participatory culture.¹¹ The old narrative provides a single authored voice (even if a team of curators work on an exhibition, they will still speak with a single voice in the old museum), while the new narrative, a collage rather than a panoramic view, is multiple-authored, allowing

11 A. Rigney, "When the Monograph is no Longer the Medium: Historical Narrative in the Online Age," *History and Theory* 49 (2010): 100-117 (106).

for the coexistence of different voices. Breaking up the old chronicle and narrative and the introduction of multiple authorship are two sides of the same coin. The new museum, or post-museum, as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill calls it, is a site of *mutuality*.¹² This is true of the new on-site and online museums. As a consequence, the authoritative, single voice of the historian and curator is exchanged for a multitude of viewpoints, a lot of consenting and dissenting voices.

The pluralism embraced by our present-day participatory culture manifests itself in alternatives to (art) history. They are personal, interesting, entertaining, and creative views on objects. One thing should however be taken into account: identifying a view as an alternative requires knowledge of what it is the view is an alternative to. Something is only new or alternative relative to what is old and already known. Alternative routes may easily turn out to be other routes.

The New

Recently Beth Lord argued against the use of object to illustrate stable concepts (e.g. colonialism and neoclassicism) and the understanding of history as a “fixed and continuous line along which events and objects are placed.”¹³ This criticism does not imply the abandonment of the narrative per se. What Lord seems to reject is the modernist master narrative, that is, the old, progressive, panoramic narrative of Art, the Nation, Nature, or Man.¹⁴ Such modernist master narratives are now typically found in textbooks, and they may still influence current, more conventional museum exhibitions. To be sure, one can write a panoramic narrative without writing a modernist narrative of progress and regardless of the topic one deals with (even the well-known micro-histories provide panoramic views of at least one century).

Lord discusses the Museum of America in Madrid, which she considers to be a good example of an alternative to traditional exhibition practices.

12 E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2000), xi. The conflict between the single-voiced narrative of the past and the pluralism of personal viewpoints is much emphasized, for example by G. Black, *Transforming Museums in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2012), 145.

13 B. Lord, “From the Document to the Monument: Museums and the Philosophy of History” in *Museum Revolutions*, eds. S. Knell, S. Macleod, and S. Watson (London: Routledge, 2007), 355-366 (360).

14 For this description, see Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums*, 24-25.

“Instead of starting with one continuous history or one total concept of a culture and using the objects to illustrate it, the Museo de America starts with the *objects* and relates them to develop discontinuous historical series.”¹⁵ Lord emphasizes that she is not arguing for a focus on objects only, for that would turn objects into artworks to be appreciated aesthetically; history museums, after all, are in the business of communicating history. The Museum of America

treats its artefacts as historical documents, but not as particulars through which the visitor is supposed to connect with a universal concept or fixed continuity of history. Objects are not made to refer to anything, but *taken together* in small groups they are starting points for developing micro-histories. A seventeenth-century Peruvian pot is shown amid Peruvian pots from different centuries up to the present day. In the next case, Mayan religious objects are shown alongside Catholic religious objects, used around the same time in the same area.¹⁶

These two groups of objects, each constituting a small historical series, are discontinuous with one another. Instead of transmitting a fixed idea about colonialism and Peruvian culture, it makes clear to visitors that objects can be used to make different histories. The objects are presented in an order of co-presence, since pots from different centuries and different religious objects are shown together, simultaneously, side by side. This alternative model of representing the past is not limited to on-site (physical) museums and is easily applied to online (virtual) museum display. Moreover, online visitors may curate such discontinuous historical series themselves.

Lord also emphasizes the visitor's involvement in the exhibition. The visitor is “encouraged to *do a kind of history*” by constructing the discontinuity between the series. As a result, they will leave the museum with a view “of history and culture as complex, puzzling and irreducibly multiple – and of history as a practice that *involves* the visitor.”¹⁷ This emphasis on “involvement” is in line with the new or post-museum as a place of mutuality and the changing roles of curators and visitors in such a museum: the curator is no longer the authoritative narrator and the visitor is no longer the passive recipient. As Hooper-Greenhill contends: “In the post-museum, histories

15 Lord, “From the Document,” 359.

16 Lord, “From the Document,” 361.

17 Lord, “From the Document,” 361.

that have been hidden away are being brought to light, and in this, modernist master narratives are being challenged.”¹⁸

The Museum of America in Madrid is in accordance with Ernst’s plea to favor the regime of archaeology above the regime of history in virtual museums. The artefact is central and should not be used to signify a continuous development or stable concept. Instead of panoramic historical narratives, discontinuous historical series are explored by visitors, leading to a collage of viewpoints in the online museum. In this view, the museum object is an item in a possible discontinuous historical series involving the visitor, just as it is for Lord. The order of co-presence of objects in virtual museums is an alternative to both the chronicle and the retrospective, panoramic, historical narrative. One of its consequences is that the insight of late eighteenth-century German Romanticism not to measure the past by contemporary standards – the founding insight of modern historical consciousness – no longer appears valid, for what was once past is now measured in terms of an eternal present. The distinction between past, present, and future on which history (narrative) is based is no longer considered to be useful; beginnings, middles, and ends will become obsolete. Ernst observes:

Beginning *medias in res*, the virtual museum visitor navigates on the monitor through the Internet where (s)he faces a kind of profusion of data that might deter traditional archivists, librarians, and museum directors. The digital wonderland signals the return of a *temps perdu* in which thinking with one’s eye (the impulse of *curiositas*) was not yet despised in favor of cognitive operations. Curiosity cabinets in the media age, stuffed with texts, images, icons, programs, and miracles of the world, are waiting to be explored (but not necessarily explained).¹⁹

A curiosity cabinet presents its objects instantly as separate items, favoring the visual above thought and reflection. This is what the new online museum looks like. This *ricorso* to curiosity is, according to the cultural historian Stephan Bann, part of a larger development in museum display. He speaks of “the long-term effect of the weakening of the paradigm of

18 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums*, 145.

19 Ernst, “Archi(ve)textures,” 30. Müller contends: “the Web is ... a cabinet of wonders and curiosities. Everything is just a click away.” See K. Müller, “Museums and Virtuality,” in *Museums in a Digital Age*, ed. R. Parry (London: Routledge, 2010), 295–305 (301). Stevens observes that with the virtual museum “surprise and curiosity return to the exhibition space.” Stevens, *Virtuele Herinnering*, 111.

historicism, which has for at least two centuries dominated the classification and display of the visual arts in the West." Curiosity, so Bann tell us, makes clear that the object displayed is "invariably a nexus of interrelated meanings – which may be quite discordant – rather than a staging post on a well-trodden route through history."²⁰

The possibility offered by some online museums to create a personal selection of objects, a curiosity cabinet of one's own making, and the display of small discontinuous historical series, encouraging visitors to make their own historical connections, are not the only means of stimulating curiosity and the creation of personal perspectives on objects. A third central concept in contemporary museum theory alongside discontinuity and co-presence is the concept of immersion. This I turn to now.

The aim of immersive display is to have visitors take a leap backwards and replay the past by means of *empathy*.²¹ Autobiographical stories of historical agents, reenactments, 3-D modelling, video games,²² simulations, and (virtual) reconstruction, all aim at such *aesthesis*, either in on-site (physical) museum settings or in online (virtual) environments.²³ Experiencing the past as then-contemporaries experienced it is preferred to the retrospective point of view of the narrative, a view which is a necessary condition of the awareness that the immersion itself provides the *illusion* of experiencing the past as then-contemporaries experienced it. The chronicle underlies

20 S. Bann, "The Return to Curiosity: Shifting Paradigms in Contemporary Museum Display," in *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium*, ed. A. McClellan (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 117-130 (120). On this return to curiosity, see also M. Henning, *Museums, Media, and Cultural Theory* (New York: Open University Press, 2006), 143-154.

21 Lord, "From the Document," 358. Lord identifies what I take as the aesthesis of history as an old model which she opposes. This model she describes thus: "Understanding and interpreting the museum object involves recognising its concept, replaying its truth and rediscovering the self through empathic connections with the object." 358. What is missing in Lord's essay is the retrospective narrative, which is the true opposite of what she refers to as empathy and replaying the past.

22 For immersion in video games, see W. Kansteiner, "Alternate Worlds and Invented Communities: History and Historical Consciousness in the Age of Interactive Media," in *Manifestos for History*, ed. K. Jenkins et al. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 137-139.

23 Griffiths argues that there is a "sense of *déjà vu* pervading contemporary debates about the uses of digital technology in museums, with curators facing many of the same challenges that their predecessors faced." (384) One such debate is about evoking "the sensory experience of immersion and time travel." (383) The new museum is thus not as new as it seems. A. Griffiths, "Media Technology and Museum Display: A Century of Accommodation and Conflict," in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition Account*, ed. D. Thorburn et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 375-389. Grau discusses several historical and contemporary examples of immersion in his wonderful book. See O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

this alternative model in that time is considered to be a series of instances one can hop into. The chronicle, then, is not used to present history; it is used to immerse the visitor in history.

Immersive museum display turns the on-site and online museum visitor into a contemporary of the object, similar to the presentation of objects in an order of co-presence, an eternal present sense of which both the object and the visitor are part. There is, however, a fundamental difference between these two alternative models of representing the past. Immersing oneself in history gives one the illusion of being a contemporary of historical agents, thus abolishing the distance between past and present, whereas the order of co-presence turns the visitor into a contemporary of the historical agent and the objects associated with him, thus categorically abolishing the past and the future.

The emphasis on providing experiences is a key characteristic of contemporary museum display.²⁴ In narrative theory too there is shift from a focus on narrative structure to studying narrative effects such as immersion and experience, a shift to the analysis of how readers “become imaginatively immersed in the lives of others and in worlds other than their own,” as Ann Rigney puts it. According to Rigney, this shift is a response to the emergent information technology, which allows new sorts of interaction and new immersive virtual environments.²⁵ There is no reason to doubt the truth of this observation; there is, however, a crucial difference between the contemporaneous or historical agent’s point of view and the retrospective or historian’s point of view. The shift of attention in narrative theory that Rigney refers to either does not apply to historical narratives, for which the retrospective view is essential, or the retrospective historical narrative is becoming a thing of the past.

The Old

On the one hand, there are reasons to doubt whether the chronicle is still a viable model of representing the past on-site and online. On the other hand, we may think that the computer is an ideal chronicler, for it can generate a complete list of all objects and events including the experiences and observations of contemporaries of those events. It can register when something was made, the way it was made, and for what reason it was

24 Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums*, 143

25 Rigney, “When the Monograph,” 108-109.

made. There is, however, one important and decisive shortcoming of such machines, as the late American philosopher Arthur Danto points out.²⁶ The Ideal Chronicler has no knowledge of the future: it simply registers when the object is made, collected, exhibited, damaged, admired, and discarded; all of which are descriptions from a contemporaneous point of view. When the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website states that in 1618 the Thirty Years War began with the Defenestration of Prague, a statement presupposing knowledge of the future of that event is made, for only *after* 1648 did it make sense to state that in 1618 the Thirty Years War had begun. The statement "In 1618 the Thirty Years War began" thus cannot be part of the Ideal Chronicler's list. We should also realize that not one of the Protestants throwing the two Habsburg regents and one of their secretaries out of the window did so with the intention of starting a thirty years war. Contemporaries cannot view the events they witness or participate in from the perspective of the historian or curator. This limitation to *Verstehen* neither makes the procedures of understanding past thoughts and experiences redundant, nor is it to be taken as a criticism of immersive museum display which aims to provide a sense of experiencing the past as then-contemporaries experienced it. It does, however, mark a fundamental difference between the chronicle – a list, inventory, or sequence of descriptions of objects – and the narrative, which presents a development to which objects contribute and which is seen from the retrospective view of the historian or curator.

Another important difference between the chronicle and the retrospective narrative is that the former is a realist model in that it wants to map the past as it was for those witnessing and experiencing it. As such it is in accordance with the museum as an inventory of the world, telling its visitors "what is" with the objects they showcase. It is also in accordance with the conception of the web as a storehouse of information, a database of items waiting to be ordered and explored by its visitors. The narrative, by contrast, is an idealist model in that it aims at understanding the past by means of panoramic views that had no existence in past reality itself.²⁷ Idealist philosophy of history holds that history rather than being found in past reality results from retrospective understanding.²⁸

26 A. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1985), 143-181.

27 F. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic. A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 75-89.

28 C. van den Akker, "The Exemplification Theory of History: Narrativist Philosophy and the Autonomy of History", *The Journal of the Philosophy of History* 6 no. 2 (2012): 236-257.

This idealist model fits the old museum as a place of contemplation, telling its visitors how what there is should be understood by having objects signify historical developments that only come into view in retrospect. It may, however, also fit the new museum as a place of mutuality, for there is no reason to argue against fixed and continuous narratives in favor of discontinuous historical series involving the visitor when it is realized that both continuity and discontinuity are the result of historical understanding. Moreover, the same object may be used to tell different stories, so there is no reason to assume that the narrative automatically leads to an understanding of history as fixed and stable, as Lord thinks, as long as visitors are encouraged to have an understanding of objects as potentially telling different stories. Finally, (historical) art and artefacts should not merely tell us what the past was like; they should make us aware of the difference between the past and the present, and with that, of what we are no longer. In this conception, objects are to be understood retrospectively.

On the one hand, the chronicle, as a list of items, is conceptually related to the order of co-presence, for the latter too leads to an inventory of items. On the other hand, it is not, since the order of co-presence rejects the chronicle by its refusal to be ordered chronologically. The chronicle is also conceptually related to immersion in that immersion aims at taking the contemporaneous point of view, following the sequence of instances that is characteristic of the chronicle.

If we were forced to choose between the chronicle and the narrative, we would have to choose the latter from the perspective of historical understanding, for, as Danto observes, “the whole point of history is not to know about actions as witnesses might, but as historians do, in connection with later events and as parts of temporal wholes,” that is, with the help of narratives.²⁹ The aesthesis of history aims at providing the illusion of experiencing the sight and sound of the past itself. As such it is a promise of doing without history, for if we would be satisfied with experiencing the past as then-contemporaries experienced it, the historical retrospective narrative would be redundant. Now we may appreciate Allan Megill’s warning that the aesthesis of history withholds us from experiencing “a rift, a break, between what *we are* now and what *others were* then.”³⁰ The contemporaneous point of view does not allow the experience of such a break. Displaying objects in an order of co-presence also turns the visitor

29 Danto, *Narration*, 183.

30 A. Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide To Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 213.

into a contemporary of the object, abolishing the past *and* the future (the one cannot exist without the other) in favor of the present (which can exist without the past and the future). Obviously, the presentation of objects in an order of co-presence lacks the retrospective view of the historical narrative too.

Conclusion

Karsten Harries once wrote that “what needs preserving does so precisely because it has lost its place in our world and must therefore be given a special place.”³¹ This explains why the Museum Clementine preserved the pagan epigraph, the sleeping Cleopatra, and the papyrus scrolls of early Christianity. Danto agrees with Harries when he observes that the place such objects “once fit into no longer is open,” which means, among other things, that in normal circumstances, it no longer makes sense to speak about them in the present sense: it is their *fate* to be spoken about in the imperfect.³² Here the past and the present are separate realms: the past is identified with the retrospective point of view, and the present is identified with the contemporaneous point of view. Rather than being simply a chronological distinction, a matter of determining what happened before and what comes after, the distinction between past and present is a distinction in modality. What no longer belongs to our worlds is something that no longer can be seen from a contemporaneous point of view. This may provide a ground for the existence of museums. We have (art) history museums to preserve what no longer belongs to our world, as reminders of what has been and is no longer, and by extension, of what *we* have been and are no longer.

Throughout this chapter I have identified the present with the contemporaneous point of view, the past with the retrospective point of view, and the future with the anticipatory point of view. It helped us to distinguish between the chronicle and the old and new narrative, and it enabled us to discuss the three alternative models of representing the past. The conclusion is not that the chronicle and narrative are *the* two basic models from which other models are derived. Rather the distinction between the contemporaneous and the retrospective point of view is basic, for this distinction enabled us to compare the different models. The following conclusion now seems warranted: The discontinuity of unconnected and plural historical

31 K. Harries, “Hegel on the Future of Art,” *Review of Metaphysics* 27 (1974): 677-696 (678).

32 Danto, *Narration*, 295.

series, the eternal present tense of objects in the new on-site and online museums, and the promise of immersive technologies to open all worlds, point in the direction of an a-historicist “archaeological” relation with the past. Janus might allow it, Chronos would rejoice, Clio, however, would regret it, for History would no longer triumph over Time.

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